



Thailand: an overview

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- The place

- The people

- Brief history

- Thai worldviews

 - Buddhism

 - Culture and social organization

 - Social values

- Key events and persons

- Challenges of modern Thailand

- Contemporary Thai politics



Area: 514,000 sq km

Population: 60 millions (6-8 in Bangkok!)

Ethnic groups: Thai 75%, Chinese 14%, other 11%

Religions: Buddhism 95%, Muslim 3.8%, Christianity 0.5%, Hinduism 0.1%, other 0.6% (1991)

Languages: Thai, English (secondary language of the elite), ethnic and regional dialects

Literacy: 93.8%



Government: democratic constitutional monarchy

Executive branch:*chief of state:* H.R.H. King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX of the Chakri Dynasty)(since 9 June 1946)

note: there is also a Privy Council

head of government: Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (since 9 February 2001) (No. 31st), now (2005) in the second term.

Legislative branch:bicameral National Assembly consists of

1. the Senate (200 seats; members elected)
2. the House of Representatives (500 seats; members elected)

Both serve four year terms.





Central: fertile basin of the Chao Phraya River

North: mountainous, hill tribes

independent kingdoms in the past (ex: Sukhothai, Chiangmai)

Northeast (Isan) :the Korat Plateau

- arid region , harsh climatic conditions often result in this region being subjected to floods and droughts.
- evidence of Vietnamese and Khmer influences (Khmer temples dating back to c. 12)
- Recent excavations suggest flourishing Bronze Age civilisation, some 5,000 years ago (ex: Ban Chiang in Udonthani)

South: once a part of Srivijaya Empire



The People

- settlement and cohabitation of diverse ethnic groups in the Chao Phya basin (past, present):

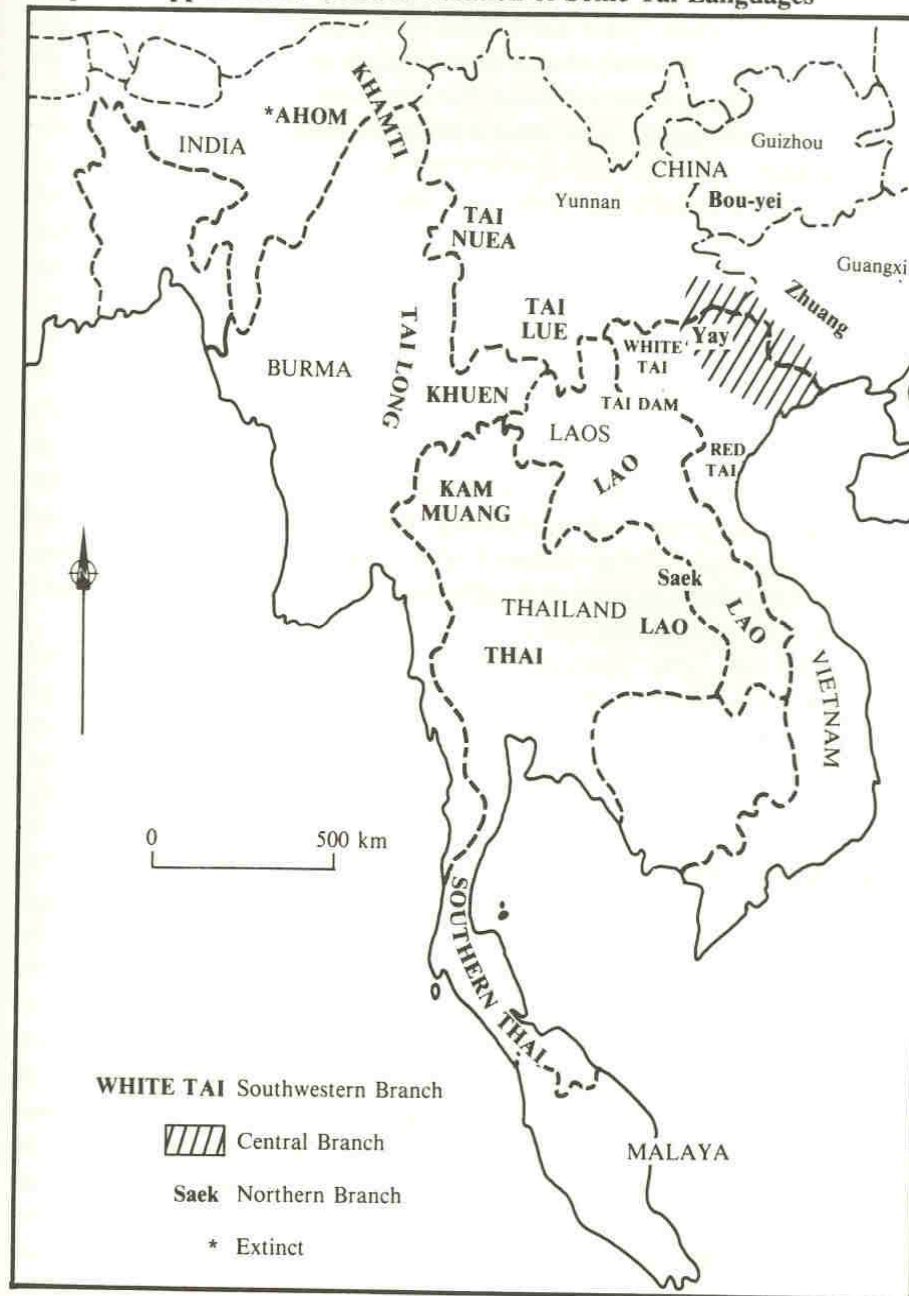
Dvaravati (Mon speaking) c.6- c. 12

Khmer c.11-c. 19

Thai c. 13 on

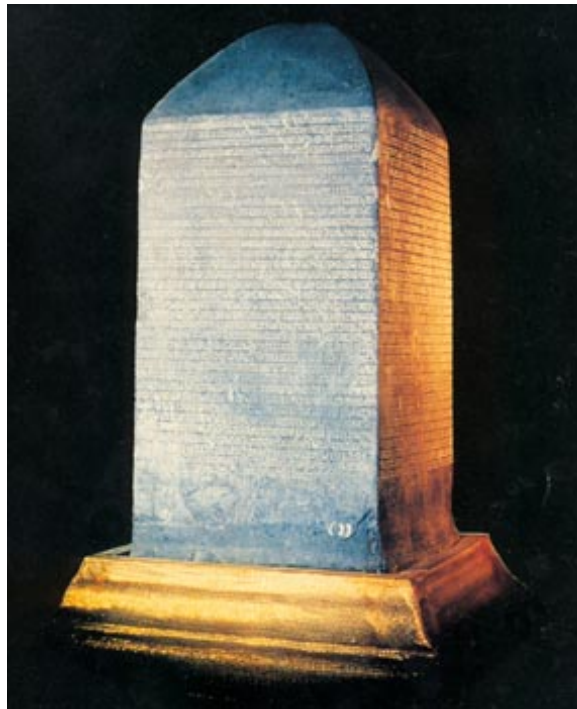
- Thai: Tai speaking group
 - ethnic, cultural, linguistic group spread from southern China to northeastern India and most of the peninsula.

Map 1.2: Approximate General Location of Some Tai Languages



Thai script

- devised by King Ramkhamhaeng in 1283 (based on "Grantha", an ancient Brahmi script of South India)
- first appeared on stone inscription



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Brief History

■ Sukhothai: first established Thai Kingdom in c. 13 (1253-1350)

- paternal monarchy in accordance with Buddhist political philosophy
- King as protector and promoter of Buddhism
- King Luthai compiled: Traiphumikatha (Three Worlds)- Buddhist cosmology in 1345





Brief History (2)

■ Ayuthaya (1350-1767) 417 years

- adopted Khmer administration model influenced by Brahminism and Hinduism
- King as "deva raja" (God King)
- "sakdina system": social stratification system, everyone assigned a numerical ranking
- international trade, contacts with western traders, establish relations with western nations.
 - King Narai (1656-1688)
- expansion of territory



Thonburi (1767-1782)

- Bangkok (1782- now)

- early period (1782- ~1800 (Rama IV)
 - recover and reestablish the stable Kingdom
 - Chakri dynasty
- "Westernization" period: reaction to threat from western imperialism
 - Rama IV (King Monkut) 1851-1868
 - Rama V (King Chulalongkorn) 1868-1910
 - accept unequal treaties: 1855 Bowring Treaty: (with Britain), accept western terms of trade (low limit on import/export taxes, allow extraterritorial rights)
 - ceded some territory to Britain and France



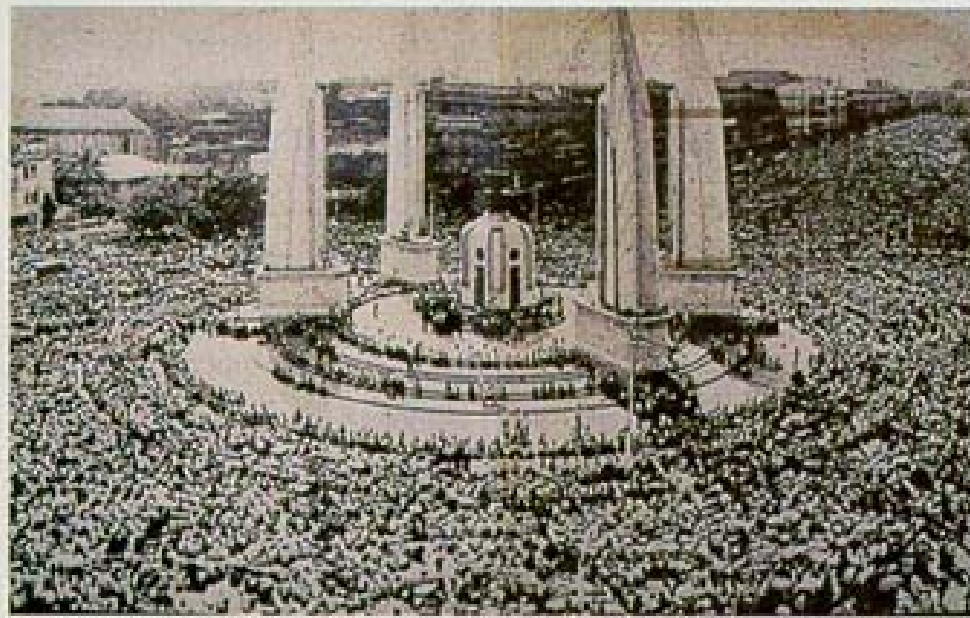
Modern period (1932- now)

- June 24, 1932, coup d'tat
- overthrow of absolute monarchy (Rama VII) by junior military officer and civil servants (western educated)
- the struggle for "true" democracy, lack of strong base for new democratic government, conflicts among elite groups
- under military led governments
 - 1938-1944, 1948-1957: P. Pibunsongkram
 - 1957-1973: Sarit, Thanom
 - Cold War, anti-communist, Vietnam War, US aids, economic development
 - "Despotic Paternalism"



Constitution movements:

- Student(and intellects) Uprising in October, 1973 : confrontation of people's movement and government force
- May 1992 demonstration demand for parliamentary government
- 1997 constitution
- from 1932-1997: 56 govts. (15 civiliam PMs leading 29 govts, 17 years in office; 7 military PM leading 27 govts, 46 years in office)







Thai social system

- agrarian society
- village as basic community unit
- habits and customs based on agriculture and religion



Thai world views

- shaped by ("popular") Buddhism (Theravada/Hinayana) + animistic + Brahminism/Hinduism
 - the law of "karma" (volitional acts)
 - every action has consequences
 - state of one's existence now is an outcome of one's "karma" (deed) in the previous life
 - cycles of rebirths, reincarnations
 - uncertainty and transiency of all things
 - tolerance, accepting fate ("plong")
 - belief of supernatural powers



■ social values and social relations

- social hierarchy (rank and authority): patron-client, senior-junior, etc..
 - hierarchy is believed to result from accumulated past "karma":- the higher the merit, the higher one's status
- reciprocity of favors and responsibilities, "gratefulness" (bunkhun) [social obligation]
- avoid conflict and confrontation
- avoid the loss of "face" (one's honor)
- forgiving nature "mai pen rai"
- fun loving ("sanuk")



Social problems

- Migration to city
- prostitution/AIDS
 - sex industry as result of unequal rural/urban economic development (rural women marginalized in Thai society)
 - sex tourism/women trafficking
- corruption (high level bureaucrats, politicians)
 - "black" economy: gambling, sex industry, drugs, smuggling, arms dealing, illegal migrant workers: generate 15-18% of GNP (Gross National Product)
- Environment



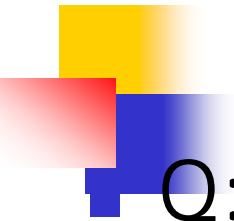
Thai Monarchy

- in late 1950, Sarit reemphasized the role of monarchy as cornerstone of Thai identity and legitimacy of the government
- foster the tradition of " Lord father" (semi-deity)
- Also, Buddhist scripture: 10 duties of Kingship (Dharma Raja– righteous king)
 - alms giving, morality, generosity, honesty, gentleness, self-restriction, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance, non- obstruction
- merit and righteousness



■ role of present King

- perform rituals
- make contact with his subjects
- concerned in the welfare of the people
- initiated many royal sponsored development projects
- a focus for national unity, thus created political "influence"
- a forum for mediation and compromise between political forces, "umpire" in the game of politics
- moral counterweight to the excesses of military and business



■ Q: By revering the King, Thais maintain traditional attitude towards authority, is this incompatible with political attitudes necessary for democracy of the society?

■ pictures



King Rama VII cedes the first constitution to Thai People





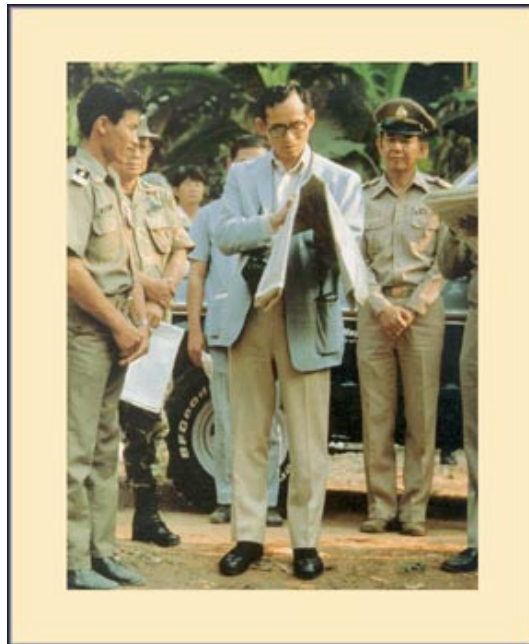
วันที่ 14 ตุลาคม 2516 เวลา 08.30 น. พระบาทสมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัวและสมเด็จพระนางเจ้า



พระบาทสมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัวภูมิพลอดุลยเดช มีพระกระแสพระราชดำรัส พระราชทานแก่ประชาชนชาวไทยและทรงพระมหากรุณาธิคุณโปรดเกล้าฯ แต่งตั้ง นายสัญญา ธรรมศักดิ์ เป็นนายกรัฐมนตรี พางทีวี ณ หอฝึกพระสมเด็จ สอนจิตรลดา



ผู้นำทางการเมืองได้เข้าเฝ้าพระบาทสมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัวในโอกาสที่มีความขัดแย้ง ในเดือนพฤษภาคม พ.ศ. ๒๕๓๕





Buddhism in Thailand

- in the past, Thai monarchs use Buddhism as unifying principle of society and legitimator of monarchic power esp. in times of transition.
- Buddhism has weakened over the past century:
 - now as rites and ceremonies only ?
 - commercialism of Buddhism(using animistic beliefs/magic, merit-making etc..)



■ But, reform movement too

- Buddhadasa: dharma is nature and duty
- roles of monks: community development, social activism, social/community service (in addition to spiritual leader)
- For laypeople, Buddhist teachings can be antedote to consumerism (neo-colonialism)
 - abandon greed, desire which are the root of sufferings
 - self-sufficiency
 - middle path
- Ideology based on Buddhist thoughts can be a tool to work through the crisis







Modern Thai politics

■ Money politics

■ Pre-Thaksin:

- MP's were provincial businessmen with powerful influence
- Parliament as “clearing house for business deals”- MP has high status, better access to business opportunities and higher level of protection
- Political parties provide access to Cabinet and govt. decision making



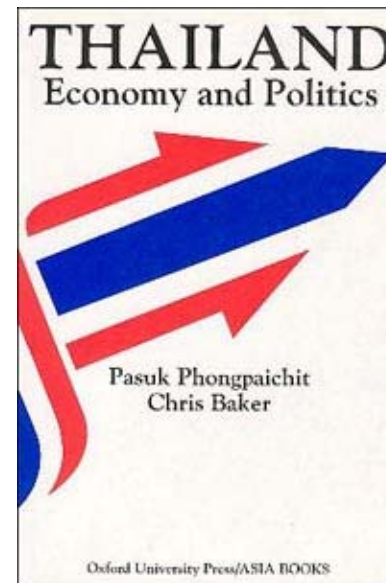
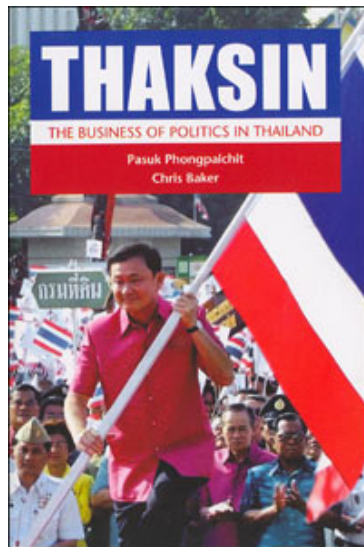
- Candidates invested heavily on elections
 - Sought ways to recoup through corruption or business profits inflated by political advantages
- Frequent Cabinet reshuffle to allow competing factions to share the benefits
- Thaksin & “Thai love Thai” era (est. 1998)
 - Billionaire from “oligopolistic telecom. concessions”
 - Initially played to post 1997 economic crisis mood



- Agrarian debt relief, village capital fund
- 30 Baht health care
- Image: “CEO-premier”/ politician of the communication age
 - Replace bureaucratic practices with more business methods
 - Populist scheme: central govt. more powerful source of patronage
- Control media
- Revive the prestige and expand the role of the military as instrument of political control
- Present himself as national leader in the tradition of Pibun and Sarit (!!)
- Move from political system revolving around provincial boss to one dominated by big parties supported by big money.

Books on Thaksin

- Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand
by Pasuk Phongpaichit & Chris Baker (2004)
- THAILAND: ECONOMY AND POLITICS
by PHONGPAICHIT AND BAKER (2002)






The big picture of Thai political traditions

(Baker & Phongpaichit 2005)

2 main (opposing) traditions

1) Strong absolutist state

- Absolute monarchy in Rama V
 - Right of monarchy to rule explained by history (continuity of monarchy since Sukhothai)
 - Expected role of nation = unified, passive, obedient

- 
- Replaced by military dictators in late C.19th (WWII) (ex. Pibun govt.)
 - Strong dictator state justified to overcome external threats (Communism) and internal threats (the Chinese)
 - The right of military elite to rule explained by history (Thai as a martial race)
 - Mid c. 20th, Sarit with US help reunited the royal and military strand of tradition



C. 21st, Thaksin revived the formula

- Need for strong authoritarian state justified to overcome external threats (globalization) and internal threats (democratization)
- Business-political elite explained by selflessness, professionalism (use of business method)
 - Expected role of mass: remain united and passive
- 2) Opposing tradition
 - Aspiration of commoner intellectuals (Started in late C. 19th)
 - The enemy is not external or internal threats, but the strong state itself



■ Inspirations:

- C.20th: European liberalism & socialism
- Cold War: communism & ideals of liberalism & democracy
- Now: human rights, civil society, ideal community & direct democracy
- Embrace diversity
- Promote govt. based on principle, and role of constitution
- Usually finds parallelism within Buddhism



WEBSITES

- CIA Fact Book:
<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/th.html>
- Thai Government:
<http://www.thaigov.go.th/>
- Golden Jubilee Network:
<http://www.kanchanapisek.or.th/>